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Celebration marks progress in Newtok relocation project

August 25, 2017

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The one-mile road that once connected the village of Newtok to the Ninglik River is gone, washed away by storm-driven erosion. All that’s left of the road is a broken skeleton of its metal support beams and fading memories of village residents.

“There used to be hills where I went sledding as a kid,” said Newtok resident Teddy Tom as he boated along the river bank where the road once sat. “From the other side, you couldn’t see the village because of bluffs.

“Now it’s open.”

Newtok no longer rests on high ground. The river regularly floods the boardwalk that connects homes to one another around the village. The river washes closer to the runway where small planes land. Barges that used to deliver supplies are now unable to dock. Due to the erosion, the village is moving nine miles downriver to a new location, Mertarvik.

At the new site, construction is moving forward. A new two-mile road is being built, vital to the location's progress, and a sign of things to come. The new road will connect the town to a rock quarry. The rock will be used to create the foundations of homes, build roads in the new community and other infrastructure projects.

On Aug. 10, the village of Newtok celebrated the road's progress and development at the new site, Mertarvik, which has five new homes built and occupied, and the foundational pilings for four more. The site also has a completed construction camp and the foundation for the Mertarvik Evacuation Center, built to protect the health and safety of the new community in the future.

The village began the day by hosting a potlatch at the Newtok school with delicious food, drumming and dancing. Newtok Village Council President, Paul Charles, gave words of thanks and community members watched video about the relocation by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, who has partnered with the community in the relocation efforts to ensure their subsistence lifestyle and cultural traditions will last for future generations.

ANTHC Newtok Relocation Layout Plan



Guests in attendance included representatives from DOWL, the Denali Commission, the State of Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Alaska State House Representative Zach Fansler and ANTHC.

After the potlatch and presentation, many from the village and guests made the 40-minute trek by boat to the new site for a ribbon cutting ceremony. The crowd toured the location and the new construction camp, featuring a kitchen/lounge building equipped with on-site hot and cold running water from water tanks fed by two drilled wells, a bathroom with four showers and four toilets, three washers and dryers and a boiler.

"I like this place," said Mary George, who sat on the steps of her new home in Mertarvik with her husband Mark and watched their grandson Darren Kilongek cutting firewood for the upcoming winter. Mary George said she's gotten used to the muted buzz of the 125-kW generator that creates electrical power equivalent to the electricity currently available in Newtok.

The day before the ceremony, moose were seen across the river and musk oxen have been known to visit Mertarvik from time to time. The gentle slope behind the new site is covered with blueberries, easily accessible to Elders. When the winter snows come, children of the village will again have a place to sled and new memories to make.



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